Recreational Fishery Management Issues in Oregon

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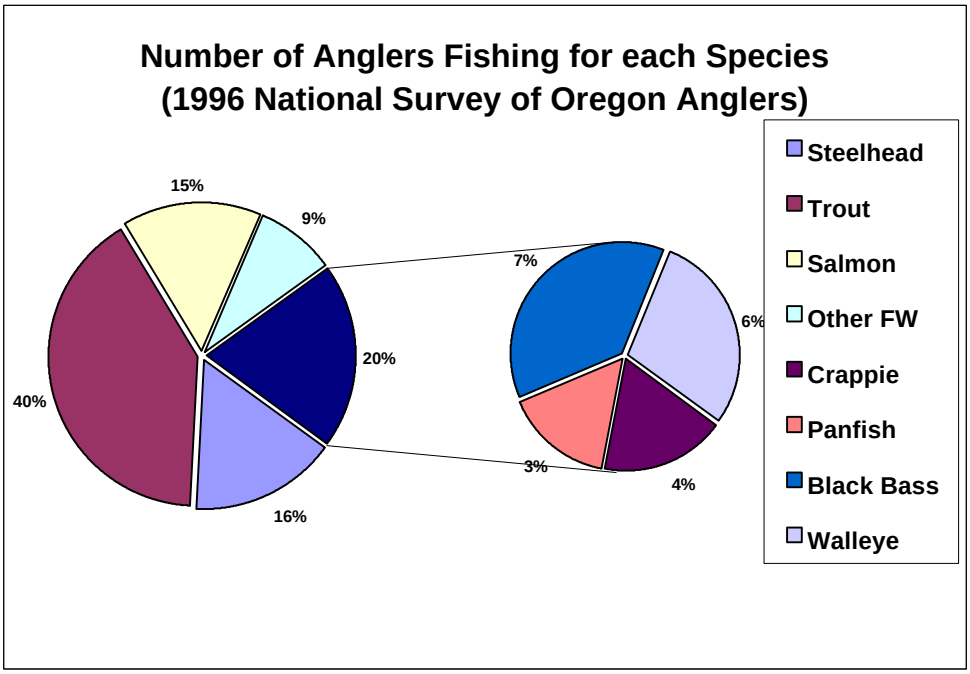
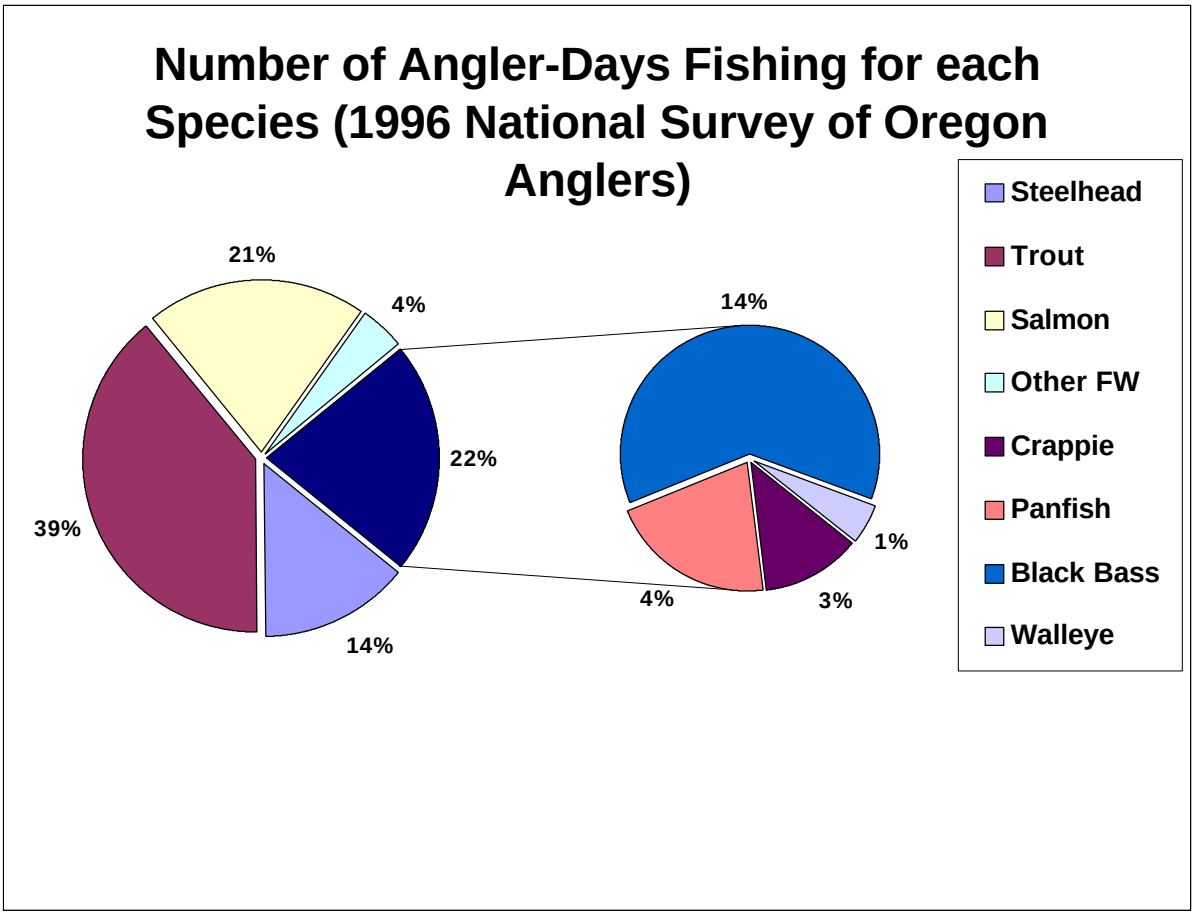
Importance of Fisheries for Introduced Species

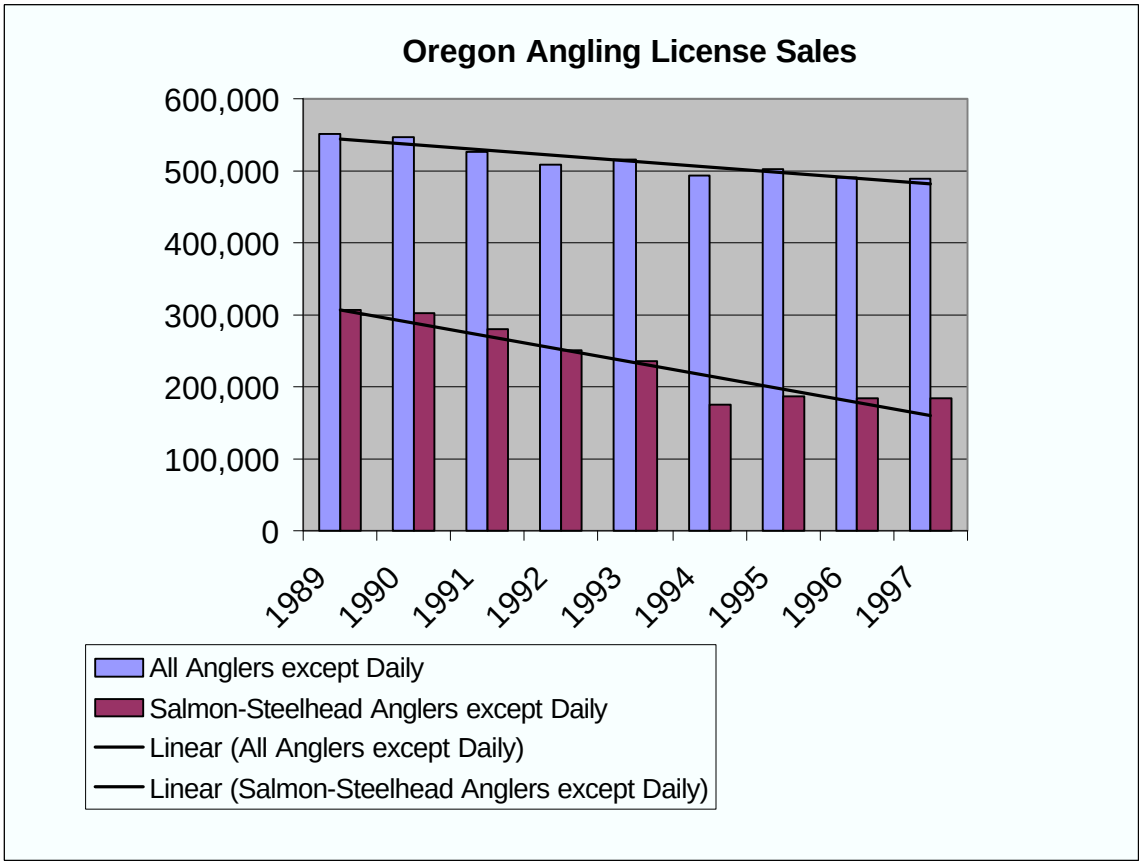
Warmwater game fish support extremely popular and economically important fisheries. Largemouth and/or smallmouth bass and panfish account for much of the angling activity in many lakes and reservoirs across the state. The coastal lakes are the most popular and productive largemouth bass fisheries in the state, and also receive heavy use by those seeking panfish. The Columbia, Willamette, Umpqua and John Day rivers provide important fisheries for smallmouth bass. Bass, crappie and channel catfish attract thousands of anglers to the Snake River and its impoundments. Walleye in the Columbia River are among the largest in North America and are sought by professional and sport anglers from throughout the nation. Striped bass provide trophy fisheries in the Coos and Umpqua estuaries, while American shad receive heavy angler use in the Columbia, lower Willamette, and Umpqua rivers. Non-native brook, brown and lake trout, and Atlantic salmon also provide significant or unique fisheries, adding to the diversity of angling opportunities available. A high percentage of the angling opportunity afforded by lakes and streams at higher elevations is for brook trout (e.g. Century Drive lakes in Central Oregon), as brooks do better than other trout species in these tough habitats. The brook trout stocking program in lakes provides an estimated $100 to $300 in benefits for every dollar expended. Brown trout support trophy type fisheries in streams and a few lakes in the upper Deschutes Basin. They often do better than other trouts in habitats impacted by flow fluctuations and high temperatures. For example, they provide the only consumptive fishery in sections of the upper Deschutes River where flow manipulations below reservoirs have impacted native redband trout. The stocking of browns provides a fishery in the Owyhee River below Owyhee Dam, which is subject to low flows and high temperatures. Their piscivorous food habits allow them to co-exist with and utilize non-game fish where other trouts fail to compete successfully. Lake trout provide a trophy fishery in four lakes in the upper Deschutes basin and in Wallowa Lake. Atlantic salmon offer another unique fishery in Hosmer and East lakes.

The 1989 Oregon Angler Survey estimated that warmwater game fish provided about 1,015,000 angler-days of recreation or 13% of the state total (trout = 49%; steelhead = 10%; salmon = 18%). Striped bass provided 24,415 angler-days of recreation or 0.3% of the state total. The 1996 national angler survey showed that 20% of Oregon anglers fished for bass, panfish, crappie or walleye. It also showed that these species accounted for 22% of the angler-days of recreation in the state.


Number of Anglers Fishing for each Species
(1996 National Survey of Oregon Anglers)
15%
9%
20%
40%
16%
7%
6%
3%
4%
Steelhead
Trout
Salmon
Other FW
Crappie
Panfish
Black Bass
Walleye


Number of Angler-Days Fishing for each Species (1996 National Survey of Oregon Anglers)
21%
4%
22%
39%
14%
14%
1%
4%
3%
Steelhead
Trout
Salmon
Other FW
Crappie
Panfish
Black Bass
Walleye

Since 1989 the estimated number of paid angling license holders has decreased by 12% (1996 figures), due primarily to loss of salmon and steelhead anglers (40% decrease in sale of salmon and steelhead tags).



However, market data and membership in warmwater angling organizations shows that participation in warmwater angling has increased during the same period. Therefore loss of license sales and angler-days of recreation would be much greater if participation in warmwater angling had not been increasing. For example:

All Sports LLC of Clackamas, Oregon reports the largest increase in sales of warmwater tackle in its history (up 37.5%) occurred in 1997 while sales of salmon and steelhead tackle took the largest downturn ever. Sales of all fishing tackle were up 18%, due to the increase in warmwater sales.

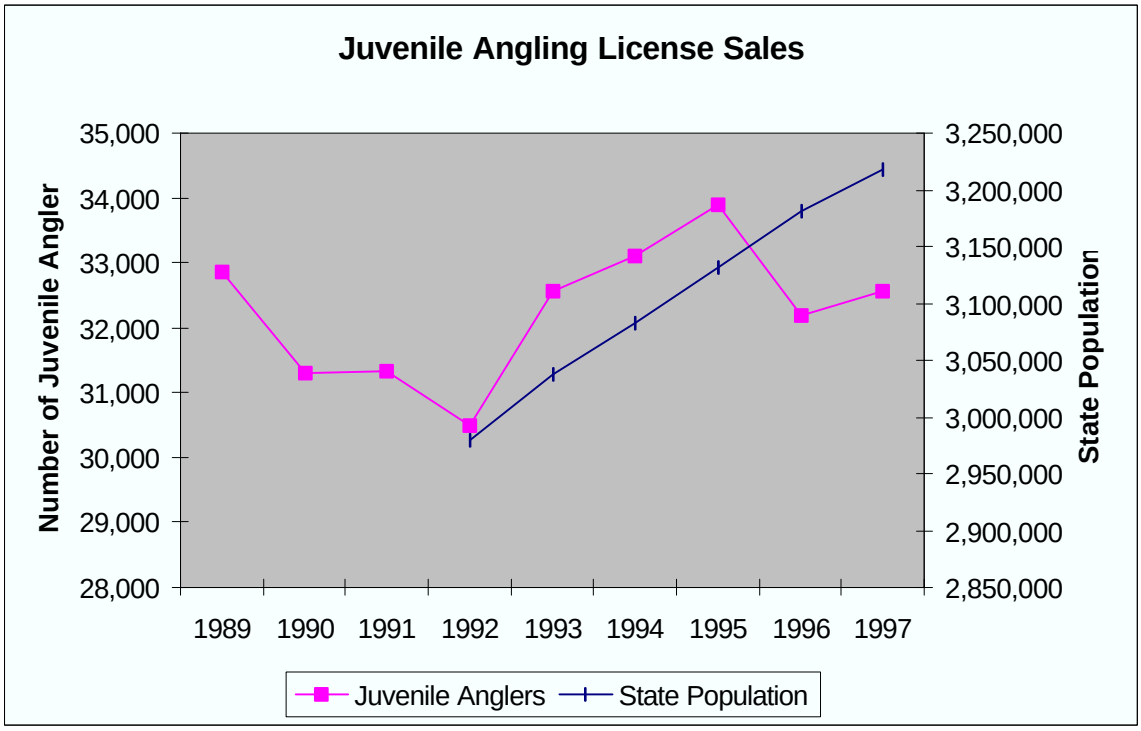
The national Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.) reports their membership in Oregon grew 84% from 1987-1997.

Membership in Oregon B.A.S.S. Federation clubs grew 30% from 1993-1997. In 1997 the Oregon B.A.S.S. Federation received about 50 referrals per month from National B.A.S.S. from anglers inquiring about bass fishing in Oregon.

Angling for warmwater species offers one of the few avenues available for replacing angling opportunity lost because of restrictions on salmon, steelhead and trout fisheries to protect native species. The fishery value of warmwater species continues to increase as conservation necessitates the curtailment of these fisheries. Most streams in the Umpqua Basin were closed to trout fishing in 1998 to protect the endangered cutthroat trout, increasing the importance of the smallmouth bass fishery. Reduction of salmon and steelhead opportunities on the Columbia has caused some big boat owners to convert to walleye fishing.

"Panfish" provide important entry level fishing opportunities for kids and other potential new anglers because opportunities are usually available close to home, techniques are simple and some success is assured. As American society shifts from rural to urban, fewer youth have the opportunity to start fishing as a natural part of growing up. Sales of juvenile angling licenses in Oregon have declined in

recent years, even as the state's population continued to grow rapidly. Warmwater fishing opportunities in urban areas could help offset this trend. A national survey showed that those who remain lifelong anglers usually start at an early age. Fewer anglers could mean less support for the protection and management of all fishery resources, including native species and their habitats.



Warmwater game fish are often the only species currently available capable of providing angling opportunity in human-altered habitats that no longer support native species, and where restoration as habitat for native species is not feasible. Examples are many reservoirs where fish passage for anadromous species was not provided and reservoir habitat is unsuited to native resident species. Warmwater game fish often provide the only summer angling opportunity in stream reaches which become too warm for salmonids. Examples are the Willamette, South Umpqua, Umpqua and John Day rivers. A number of licensed fishing guides focus their summer business on the smallmouth bass fisheries in the Umpqua and John Day rivers.

Issues

Issues related to maintaining recreational opportunities where native and introduced fishes co-occur include:

Public Support for Fish Management

The sacrifice of agency support from warmwater anglers because of an agency stance that may be viewed as anti-warmwater fish may not be necessary or wise if it doesn't advance the conservation of native species. Anglers are the traditional source of revenue and political support for agency programs. Alienation of warmwater anglers can be minimized by strong agency support for development of fisheries for non-native species where there are no native fish concerns.

Possible Deregulation of Introduced Species

ODFW is considering removing limits on non-native fishes in waters where they co-occur with native species that are listed or being considered for listing under state or federal endangered species

acts. This action is strongly opposed by most warmwater angling groups who feel that they are being singled out or made "scapegoats" to bear the brunt of native fish restoration when more important issues, such as dams and other habitat degradation, aren't being addressed because of political considerations. The evidence of harm to native fish populations by exotic fishes is mixed and the prospects for relief from predation and competition through increased exploitation of non-native fishes are also mixed. In most cases it is predicted that there would not be measurable increases in the sustainability of native fish populations. Anglers have said that if the state is serious about reducing populations of non-native predatory fishes in the Columbia River, it should advocate restoring a riverine environment to make the habitat less suitable for the exotic predators and more suitable for native anadromous salmonids. In the face of these arguments and the opposition that deregulation of non-native fish species will generate, the state should consider whether the potential benefits outweigh the negatives.

Lack of consistency among states

Some western states are actively managing to improve fisheries for walleye, tiger muskellunge or other non-native predators while ODFW is opposed to any expansion of their distribution. This leads the angling public to question agency positions and actions.

Management of illegally introduced species

ODFW is reluctant to "reward" those who illegally stock new species by managing these populations for maximum public benefit. Nearly always the date and source of the new introduction is unknown, and often there is the possibility that the introduction was unintentional. In the past ODFW has generally tried to improve the resulting fisheries. However that response is being questioned. When largemouth bass appeared in Crane Prairie Reservoir, a premier trout lake, around 1980, the state retained the statewide limit on bass in the reservoir and eventually recognized them in the Fish Management Plan. However a recommendation from the Public Advisory Committee to manage the population as a quality fishery, with possible special regulations, was rejected by agency staff and the Commission. An illegal introduction in about 1994 of largemouth bass in Davis Lake, a fly-only trout lake in the Cascades, resulted in an agency decision to actively manage against bass by excluding them from statewide limits.

Catch and Release

Anglers are increasingly practicing voluntary catch and release on bass and walleye. This can improve angling quality but reduces the opportunity for managers to change populations through regulations to change exploitation.

Two Story Fisheries

Opportunities to manage for both trout and warmwater species may not be developed because of agency inertia/reluctance to endorse this relatively new and untested concept that may have merit for maximizing public benefits. An example again is Crane Prairie Reservoir bass and trout.

Lack of information on distribution of T&E species

This lack of information on the distribution or potential distribution of native species of concern limits the ability of managers to develop new fisheries for introduced fishes.